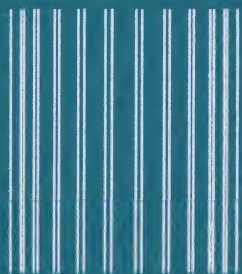




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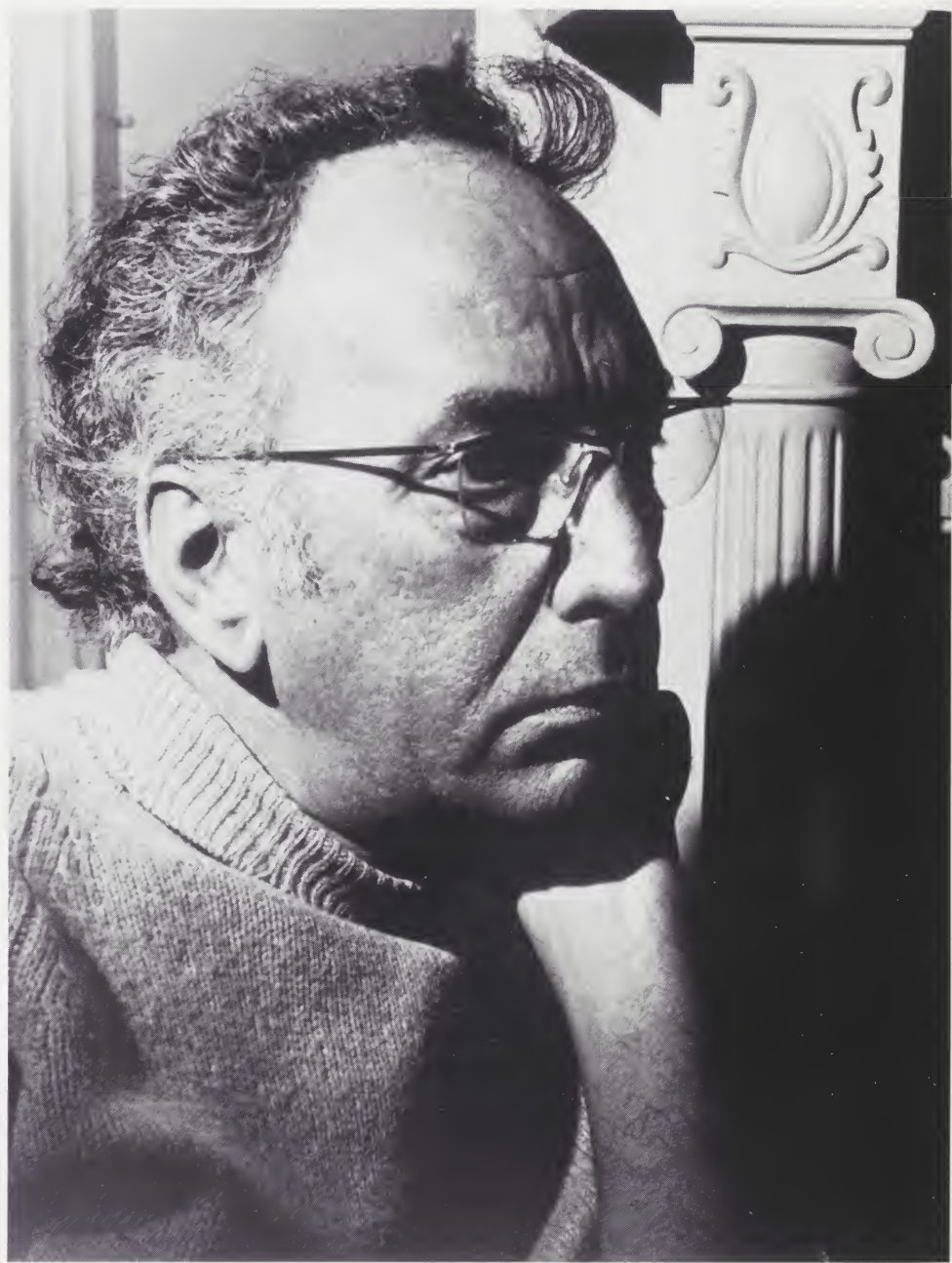
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Homage to William Bronk

RICHARD ELMAN

When William Bronk's book of poems *The World, The Worldless*, published by June Oppen for New Directions in 1963, was sent to me by Wilfred Sheed, then literary editor of *Commonweal*, for an omnibus review of the fall books of poetry, I'd never heard of Bronk, but I was taken with the originality of tone and lack of artifice in his work, and I convinced Sheed to allow me to review the poems in a thousand-word essay.

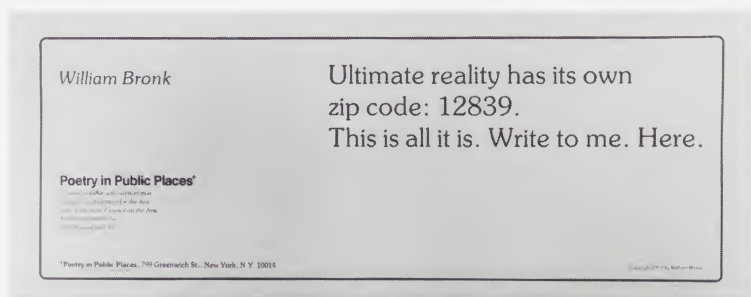
In discovering Bronk's poems more or less on my own, I found much to praise. I called his writing "the ornament to its own honesty." I pointed out that one of his themes was how "naming things" gives them "shapes which tyrannize and imprison our perceiving of them," and repeated the lines in "Ignorant Silence in the Center of Things": "If we could talk, could hear each other speak. . . ."

My piece was among the first serious considerations his poems had received; Bronk was so far removed from the literary world of reputations coined and slandered that he confessed to me he was surprised to have gotten any notice at all, and very grateful, as I later learned, when he wrote a handwritten note from Hudson Falls, New York, forwarded by *Commonweal*: he would be in New York in a couple of weeks, before setting out on a winter holiday to Egypt, and could I meet him in the Algonquin Hotel bar for a drink?

The figure who greeted me that day in the bar was certainly different from the independent-minded country man of homely diction I had imagined Bronk would be—the man who wrote of living "in a hogan under a hovering sky," or, with a characteristically thoughtful and laconic mood, of painting an old house yellow. This tall, somewhat somber but well-turned-out fellow, in his late forties, in a teal blue double-breasted business suit with a

Opposite: William Bronk, circa 1976

maroon foulard, was waiting for me in the small, dimly lit bar. He wore glasses and his eyes seemed full of light. Up close his face was large, with strong features and thin lips, a gauntness masked by florid cheeks and a generous jaw—a soft enough glance, though, with which he eyed me for some moments, and then introduced himself as “Bill Bronk.”



Bronk's poem appeared on New York City buses and was later printed in *Life Supports*.

I was to be befriended that afternoon and from then on, learning simultaneously, and with only apparent contradiction, how devoutly Bill held to his public manner of small-town businessman, quite apart from his real life as poet in his zip code ONE TWO EIGHT THREE NINE.

His family dated back to the original Dutch settlement of New York when the Bronx, he informed me, was commonly called Bronck's Farm. They'd settled next around Albany, near Selkirk and New Baltimore, where they were farmers and shipwrights, and then moved further north along the Hudson Valley. Bronk quickly told me he cared little for such a family history but still ran a family coal and wood products business in Hudson Falls where he had been raised, and lived in a residential part of town with his aging mother in a house built by his father for the family when Bill was about two years old. He was a bachelor, a solitary, and presently would be taking his annual winter vacation abroad with his sister Betty, who resided in Greenwich, Connecticut.

Bronk told me he greatly admired the poet Conrad Aiken. Like the author of "Senlin," he drank real cocktails—Manhattans or Old-Fashioneds or Martinis, I can't now recall which—and when he ordered the same again for me, had me pretty tipsy rather quickly. He kept asking me about my own interests, as though wondering what was the source of his good fortune, but I had little to tell him except that I was struggling to survive with a wife and child as a freelance literary journalist, and that I would shortly be publishing a novel with Scribner's, which I would have them send to him. The hour or so we spent together was pleasant, though at some remove from intimacy, and when we parted Bill invited me to visit him upstate whenever I cared to so we might get on better terms.

When Bronk finally read my novel, *The 28th Day of Elul*, he was surprised that my ambition was somewhat larger than I'd let on. He told me he didn't read much fiction but had read my novel with fascination and sadness. He also said he had been invited to give a reading at a university because of my review and again pressed me to visit him.

Bronk's friendship from the start was always generously bestowed and nonjudgmental. When I told him of domestic unhappiness, he simply cautioned me against taking advice from "well-intentioned strangers."

I started to visit Bill a couple of times a year—every fall and spring—in Hudson Falls. We'd take walks together along the old feeder canal towpaths of the Champlain, and he'd prepare sumptuous meals, and we'd talk a lot, mostly about writing.

It was not always easy to measure who was lonelier in those days. Bill used to call me teasingly "an outlander . . . a city boy." Listening to the robin chirping in the chinaberry tree or walking with him in the woods just beyond town was a new sort of education for me, as he named and classified certain growing things and had me taste wild plants such as fiddlehead ferns. He also encouraged me to get off my high horse and chat with some of his neighbors. In warm weather we'd take dips in the local feeder near a lock called Barney Caine, the obscure naming of which was

the subject of a poem Bill had once written. Whenever I mentioned other writers, or that literary world from which he'd deliberately managed to keep apart, Bill became edgy, sometimes cranky.



The Bronk family business in Hudson Falls, New York, circa 1976,
where the poet worked and often wrote

It was because of my friendship with Bill that I started writing poems again in the mid-sixties, a full decade after dropping Yvor Winters's tutorial at Stanford, and they were mostly haphazard efforts. When I taught literature at Bennington College, I would drive across the rolling landscape of Washington County to Bill's house for a drink and a chat, and sometimes other friends would be visiting: the painter Herman Maril and his wife, Esther, from Maryland; or Gene Canadé, who worked for the UN in Paris but was also a fine artist and engraver. Bill owned a collection of paintings by Maril and Canadé, and by Canadé's father.

Bill's family business was not doing much better than my marriage, but he kept the business open a long while for the sake of his mother and sisters (who derived some income from the estate, he once told me) and for certain of his old employees. Often

when I visited him in that vast wooden shed where he kept a big desk surrounded by his inventory of boards and sash, he'd be writing a poem in longhand while outside, in the yard, his few remaining employees filled fewer and fewer orders.

"No I do not love you," he wrote to a lover in *The Empty Hands*, "but you remind me passion does exist, as empty and meaningless as the world is. . . ."

The winters sometimes seemed especially hard on Bill. He had some childhood friends in and around Hudson Falls and some young and old aspiring writers who sometimes visited, but he kept pretty much to himself, his mother going off every winter to St. Petersburg liberating him to isolation. "Big houses alone are nice," he wrote me once after a bout of despair. "You can scream and nobody is bothered."

Bill didn't drive a car and usually walked to work, to the supermarket and the post office. He cooked for himself and shut off rooms in the house, burned newspapers along with coal in the coal stove and wrote and read and listened to music on the radio. "A really satisfactory day," he wrote in "The News": "So many we know / in the obituaries. The solemn importance of what / it means to survive comes home to us."

Aside from his friend Laura, whom he saw every Saturday night when they took in dinner and a movie together and spoke to almost every day (sometimes more than once), and such occasional visitors as myself and Gil Sorrentino, his publisher Jim Weil of the Elizabeth Press, or Cid Corman on a stopover from Japan, who'd published Bill's first book of poems through Origen Press, Bronk was alone a lot. The local high school kids did chores about the house and were drafted as company. He could get quite melancholy:

Let me not have life to look at
the way we build a snowman life . . .
buttons in and a proper hat
finished before dusk, before the rain
to wash it away. . . .

I was then living by myself in New York City, but he resisted visiting me. Bill developed emphysema, which forced him to give up smoking and to do loud breathing exercises that made him sound like a barking seal when we walked together in the woods.

I'm looking at a holograph of four liners from the 1970s in which Bill wrote to me: "If we are asked how we shall live in the world / it doesn't ask us. It lives us as it will / or else, no matter, leaves us alone. . . ."

"There are houses hanging above the stars," wrote Conrad Aiken in "Senlin: A Biography," "And stars hung under a sea. / And a sun far off in a shell of silence / Dapples my walls for me."

Spring really comes late to the Upper Hudson Valley, but by mid-March Bill's mood would improve. He'd attend chamber music concerts by a local quartet and occasional dance recitals, begin to plan another garden, go trekking for pussy willow branches (and later for morels), and await the return of his mom with trepidation and relief. They did not seem to share many values in common, though Bill always remained dutiful. He kept the house and attended to the necessities she could not herself fulfill, especially after she became an invalid. Often on pleasant afternoons he'd commence long walks in the countryside around Argyle, in part to be away from her domain. His poems of that period exclaim on the gentleness and brightness of October light, the persistence of desire, and the beauty of two lovers leaning toward each other like a pair of young trees.

Those were difficult but productive years for Bronk. He turned out collection after collection—*The Tantalus*, *To Praise the Music*, *The Empty Hands*—with poems sometimes exclamatory ("O Jesus Christ that light . . .") and sometimes ruminative and elegant; and a "partial glossary" on "costume as metaphor," a volume of prose poems meditating on some cultural assumptions that helped construct the Mayan sites of Central America, which he'd visited with his sister during another brief winter vacation.

We kept up a regular correspondence over those years, exchanging books as well as thoughts, and gossip, and poems about the seasons; I don't know whether any of my stuff is in what Bill has generously given to Columbia but I hope not, as I always scribbled in great haste in between other things and didn't consider myself a literary correspondent like Charles Olsen and Robert Creeley and some others Bill once knew well. One poem in manuscript that survives in my collection begins:

In the late summer, the sky begins to grow
larger.
Noticeably. Melons.
The blue recedes into mid Fall. . . .

Though I was always welcome to visit, I rarely did, as I was much too busy with mucking up my own life, but I always knew I had a caring friend who would welcome me and look after me no matter how frayed my condition was on arriving in Fort Edward by the afternoon train. When my oldest daughter was in boarding school in Lake Placid, I always used to stop off at Bill's place and sometimes slept over. When I would bring her away from school for a home visit, he and his mother would cook and bake all kinds of treats for the two of us. Bill once prepared a savory stew for me that he called "Brains and Balls," and that's what it turned out to be, in fact, seasoned with carrots and mushrooms and parsnips, as I recall, along with the prairie oysters.

Bill was now acquiring a major reputation, and many came on pilgrimage to Hudson Falls to meet him, interview him, secure poems from him for their publications, or to ask him to read. It was characteristic of Bill's come-hither stance toward the poetry world that he most often steadfastly refused to read with others, regarding some such invitations as slights. He was still very sensitive to slights and did not easily forget insults, whether real or imaginary. He was convinced he had been overlooked a bit

because he had never engaged in literary log-rolling and confessed to me, once, that when his first manuscript of poems, "My Father Photographed with Friends," was judged only second best by W. H. Auden, who awarded the Yale Younger Poets Prize that year to Adrienne Rich, he withdrew the manuscript from circulation for nearly twenty years and never really forgave Auden.

Bill had briefly visited at the experimental Black Mountain College and there rediscovered tastes and friendships with Creeley, Olsen, and Jonathan Williams. He'd also taught for a while at Union College in Schenectady. He'd lived in Greenwich Village among artists and experimental filmmakers like Shirley Clark but had always kept somewhat apart from New York bohemia, and for that reason, perhaps, life in a small town upstate remained congenial. He once informed me that his neighbors allowed him a freedom he could not easily have elsewhere. "I could do almost anything here short of murder," Bill told me in his droll baritone, "and people would just say, 'That's Bill, is all. It's his way,' but you being an outlander, if you cross the street wrong, a whole lot of people would be after you. . . ."

Our relationship pleads, in his words, "the permanence of ignorance." I try to drop up to see him once or twice a year, and we just sit and chat and *kvetch* a little about getting older. Bill's a lot less hale than when I first knew him and is a little hard of hearing; he no longer cooks elaborate meals or drinks alcohol or keeps up the spruce appearance of the house, and he can no longer take long walks.

In the mid-1970s, I lived for about a year in nearby Fort Edward to save money, inhabiting an upstairs flat rented to me by Bill's friend Laura. With me it was a question posed temporarily of how "one comes to despise all worldliness. . . ." My staying over with Bronk was the grace he bestowed on my neediness by his friendship. (Bill's befriending the down-and-out has often caused him regrets. One itinerant visitor to Hudson Falls, another literary gent, may have ripped off the family's heirloom silver.) It was while I was living near Bill in Fort Edward that I came to

behave as a “trickster,” writing the first of my “Little Lives” of the people of Washington County, which later appeared as a book under the pseudonym “John Howland Spyker” and caused a local scandal.

The perverse idea for such a book came from the names on tombstones in the nearby cemetery where I sometimes went to walk and by overhearing my landlady below me, in a house with paper-thin walls and ceilings, gossip every day at noon with Bill, or certain other old friends, about the obituaries and marriage announcements in the Glens Falls *Post Star*. As I recall, they’d go over the person’s entire history and various involvements from memory, and then were either bluntly dismissive or mildly nostalgic, amused, appreciative. I figured this wasn’t the *Popul Vob* I was overhearing, but good, plain, old-fashioned jive and gossip, and I could do that as well as anybody. When my book of fictive brief personal histories appeared, I had left the area and lots of local people thought that Bill had written about them. They were cross with him, and he with me. That all got sorted out when astute John Leonard, in a review in the *Times*, revealed that I was the author of those scurrilous pieces.

Bill has never really been happy about my writing about his county. Though I would have to classify such works as fiction, I also can’t deny that there was a basis in local legend, if not hard fact, for some of what Spyker alleged. On our walks Bronk was always pointing out various local types to me and recounting their histories: a philandering professional who may have inseminated all his clientele, a former war hero, a prison guard, a cellist with peculiar tastes. He’s always shown a gentle acceptance of his neighbors so different from himself in so many different ways. He is never smart-alecky about their lives. In a recent poem, “Outdate,” he writes:

The streets and houses look as if they were based
on old photos and weren’t real. They’ve brought
new people in. When old ones meet uptown
we look; we ask each other how we are. . . .



William Bronk outside his home in Hudson Falls, New York,
circa 1987

A silence fell between us when I left the area after I had fallen in love with a woman. Bill seemed to think of love as charming insouciance, if not essentially self-referential. "Loving you is love," he began a poem of that time, "but is not you. / Knowledge of you is knowing but not you. . . ." Eventually he may have been relieved that he no longer had me to look after. We continue to

correspond, and I have also written more about Bill's writings. I don't wish to repeat any of that here, though he seems to me to be a truthful and wonderful poet of the American language, as original as ever, and he continues to produce elegant and beautiful and startling short poems that often interest me, even though nowadays, as he has confessed, he writes them out in his head while shaving in the morning. Ruminating on Proust for a recent collection, Bill wrote:

The way Swann, his whole life, loved
Odette, and she not even his type, is the way
Contrarily we, each of us, love,
In spite of natural inclinations, our lives. . . .

His voice, when we are privileged to hear him read, reverberates from his ruined chest like Charlie Mingus's bass in the low registers. At Bennington a young woman fled the hall in fear and trembling when he shouted out: "Let go! Let go!" Usually he speaks softly, often with a pout. In Copán, in the silence of a vast mahogany forest, I heard his voice as I struggled with reading translations of the Mayan glyphs. I'm now teaching a course on Whitman and Melville, and almost every day I find myself referring to Bill's essays on these two in *The Brother in Elyseum*, which were written originally as his Dartmouth College undergraduate honors thesis, though published only a decade ago by Jim Weil's Elizabeth Press.

I think of Bronk visiting New York City once and coming downtown with me to Paul Pines's Bowery jazz club, the Tin Palace. Apprised of Bronk's presence in the room, a lot of the young downtown poets came over to our table to introduce themselves and pay their respects, Bill purring like a big cat and then withdrawing into himself as though his most fearsome anticipations were being realized: he had readers, fans. He was, afterwards, in no great hurry to depart. And when Cecil McBee arrived with the other members of his trio and commenced to

make music, Bronk seemed to regard all that “braided water” we call jazz as the intrusion, and relaxed, and settled back, and listened “to praise the music.”

“Homage to William Bronk” is an excerpt from an unpublished manuscript of literary memoirs entitled “Namedropping”; Mr. Elman presented these remarks to the Friends of the Columbia Libraries on the occasion of a reception for the exhibition “‘To Praise the Music’: The Poetry and Other Writings of William Bronk.” © Richard Elman

The Alphabet Explained

or, *The Origin and Progress of Letters*

JOHANNA DRUCKER

Among the many volumes that consider the history of the alphabet, describe the development of calligraphic lettering, and trace the design of printing types, there are a multitude of accounts that ascribe to the letters a symbolic value beyond their functional purpose. These accounts can be found in texts dating back to classical times, with mythic attributions of alphabet lore projecting into the undocumented ancient past. But no description of the many fascinating analyses of the symbolic values assigned to the letters within these various historical, mystical, religious, or other systems has been assembled in a single study. My forthcoming work, *From Sign to Symbol: The Alphabet in History and Imagination*, is the first attempt at collecting the vast lore of alphabet symbolism and chronicling its development. One of the many themes that weaves through this wide array of material is that of the origin of the alphabet, and it is this theme on which I shall touch in these brief notes.

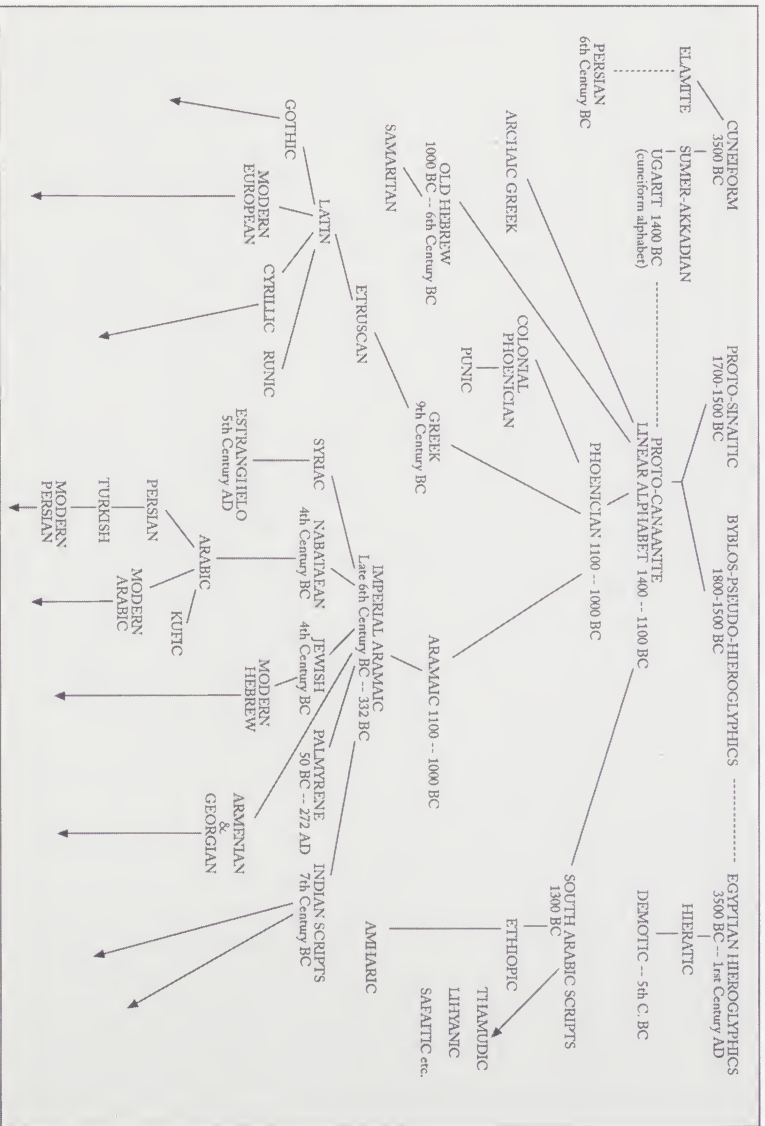
Though the origins of the alphabet are now fairly well established in archaeological terms, debates about the dates of its transmission from the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean to the islands and mainland of ancient Greece, Etruria, and beyond still divide scholars into markedly opposed camps. Artifacts uncovered in the Sinai peninsula, and dated to about 1700 B.C., provide the earliest evidence of a primitive alphabet. The general consensus is that this system developed as a result of cultural exchanges between users of the Egyptian hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts and those people employing cuneiform to represent a simplified syllabary further north and inward from the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean. By approximately 1400 B.C., a system now known as the Proto-Canaanite alphabet had stabilized.

This early system, adopted and spread by the Phoenicians along their trade routes throughout the Mediterranean, lacked

vowel notation and consisted of sixteen or seventeen standard letters. A more complete system that included notating vowels was supplied by the Greeks, and it is on the basis of this innovation that current debates between Semiticists and classicists continue to be waged—with the latter claiming an inherent superiority not only for their system, but for the culture to which it is attached. Classicists assert that the improvements in the alphabet rendered possible the development of Greek poetry, literature, law, and social organization, and they regard as inferior the contributions of earlier (and later) Semitic cultures in the same areas—despite the existence of the Old Testament, Code of Hammurabi, legend of Gilgamesh, and other written documents whose contribution to the history of Western thought is evident and venerable.

The term *alphabet* refers to the scripts that derive from the Proto-Canaanite alphabet—including all the Arabic scripts, ancient and modern Hebrew (derived separately), Russian Cyrillic, Armenian, Georgian, the alphabets of the Indian subcontinent, and the Greek and Etruscan alphabets from which our Romanized forms have evolved. The alphabet was not the oldest system of writing—Egyptian hieroglyphics and various cuneiform scripts were in existence a thousand or more years before its invention—nor is it the only form of writing still in use. Chinese characters are the other major form of written language in use today, adapted and transformed to serve the languages of Asia. Other independent inventions, such as the Indus valley script, Minoan linear B, and Mayan glyphs, have not survived as viable writing systems. Likewise, many offshoots of the alphabet, such as runes and Ogham, ancient Hebrew and Palmyrene, have disappeared from use because the people who used them have been assimilated or were conquered or diffused.

The question of the origin of the alphabet has frequently served as a focal point of speculative research: long before archaeological evidence provided the generally accepted model of development and diffusion, there was a textual tradition in which its



history was investigated, often in symbolic or mythic terms. Speculations on this tradition contain opinions on such diverse issues as the role of Divine Wisdom in the shaping of Human Thought, the contents of the Book of Nature, the basic Elements of the Cosmos, and the codes for a supposedly Universal Human Symbolism. In each era, the question of the origins of the alphabet has been answered in terms indicative of the basic spiritual and epistemological debates characteristic of the time.

For instance, almost every culture that uses writing has a myth to explain its origins. The Chinese believed that the ideograms were derived in part from the silhouetted forms of birds in flight as well as from the track marks of their footprints in wet earth; Indian legend attributes the origin of writing to the tusk of the elephant god Ganesh; the Egyptians believed that writing had been given to humans by the god Thoth; among the ancient Jews the alphabet was linked to the events at Mount Sinai and the gift of the tablets to Moses; the Greeks acknowledged that their alphabet had come from the Phoenicians, or at least from the East, a fact recorded in the name of the figure of Cadmus ("one from the East"), who was the mythic figure they held responsible for introducing the letters. The story of Thoth was also frequently recounted in classical sources: Plato, for instance, recounts a version that emphasizes the Egyptian King Thamus's mixed response to the gift because of the king's fear that it would increase forgetfulness among humans.

When the history of the alphabet began to be traced historiographically, through examination of textual evidence, a certain amount of imagination was required to reconcile the classical authors' attributions to Thoth and Cadmus and the biblical accounts of a divine gift to Moses. Attempts to make a coherent explanation of the origin and development of the alphabet did not take shape until the late Renaissance work of such figures as the renowned fifteenth-century occultist Henrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim and the seventeenth-century Jesuit and polymath Athanasius Kircher.

The concern with origins only evolved in concert with an increased concern for the process of history, particularly history as a chronological narrative with consistent dating and references. The early works that attempted to assemble the known scripts (alphabetic and otherwise) and attribute them to a particular, original source in earlier centuries often relied upon inconsistent or idiosyncratic methods. Five scripts, for instance, were included in *De Inventione Linguarum* by Hrabanus Maurus, the ninth-century archbishop of Fulda, whose work was among the first to include a mini-compendium of alphabets. These were the Hebrew alphabet (invented, Hrabanus said, by Moses); the Greek alphabet (associated with the Phoenician Cadmus, as per the traditions of antiquity); the Latin alphabet (attributed to Carmentis, a nymph and the mother of Evander); the letters of “Aethicus, the philosopher and cosmographer of the Scythian nation”; and a version of the runes (used, he stated, by pagans to record their “songs, incantations or predictions”). The only textual source Hrabanus cited was that of St. Jerome, whose thirtieth epistle to St. Paula, written in the fourth century, is a famous early instance of symbolic interpretation of the letters as a code of spiritual knowledge.

Following Hrabanus, the scholarly tradition builds on itself, incorporating errors through citation of the lineage of authorities whose sources were, very simply, each other across a stretch of several centuries. Thus by the late Renaissance a chain of attributions and citations linked the works of Kircher and Agrippa with those of the utopian visionary Guillaume Postel, Jacques Gaffarel (the kabbalist and librarian of Cardinal Richelieu), and German mystic Baron von Helmont. Some of these figures, however, also made their own, unique contributions. Postel believed (citing an older, somewhat obscure, tradition) that the letters had been derived from constellations in the heavens, while Helmont, in the wonderfully imaginative *Alphabeti vere naturalis hebraici brevissima delineatio* (1667), contributed the idea that the forms of the letters could be found in the flesh, in the configuration of the organs of articulation.

In the eighteenth century, theories of the origin of the alphabet became entangled with discussions of the origin of the state, the social contract, and notions of both the natural and primitive conditions of humankind. Debate about whether the earliest condition of human society was Edenic, rational, and harmonious, or uncivilized and barbaric contributed to discussions about the role of language and writing in either establishing the bases for law and social relations, or as evidence that they were inherent in the mind of humankind. Lord Monboddo, for instance, in his influential *The Origin and Progress of Language* (1772), argued that writing depended upon the existence of the state, while Court de Gebelin, in *Le Monde Primitif* (1775), argued that writing was merely its main instrument. The eighteenth century also saw the publication of tomes whose breadth and authority were not surpassed until the late nineteenth century. The monumental work of Thomas Astle, in particular, *On the Origin and Progress of Writing* (1784), contained as accurate an account of the origins and diffusion of the alphabet as could be constructed without the extensive archaeological discoveries of later centuries. Astle was one of the first authorities to make use of an evolutionary model of alphabet transformation and adaptation, rather than a creationist one, and his work served as the major reference up through the work of the most remarkable of all nineteenth-century writers on the topic, Isaac Taylor.

But while Astle's reasonable and clearheaded account prevailed in certain quarters, in others the historians of the eighteenth century brought their many and varied partisan interests into their narratives of alphabet origins and development. Writers such as Charles Vallencey and Roland Jones discussed the letters as a code containing the history of the settlement of the earth by the sons of Noah after the Deluge. Their accounts, fraught with nationalistic agendas, asserted that the Celts were the original settlers of Europe, and that the alphabet had been invented to represent the pre-Babel language, which was, of course, Celtic. This language had been passed to Japhet, the only one of Noah's sons pure

enough to deserve the continued use of the original, unspoiled language. Another eighteenth-century writer, L. D. Nelme, used similar arguments to assert the “English-Saxon” origin of the alphabet, basing much of his analysis on the form of the Chaldean letter *aleph*, which he read as a map of the early migrations out from the central circle of Eden.

One of the most exceptional volumes in alphabet historiography in Columbia University’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library is a work published in 1802, *Ancient Alphabets and Hieroglyphic Characters Explained*. The work is a translation and presentation by Joseph Hammer von Purgstall, who stated that the original author of the work had lived a thousand years earlier. This purported author, Ahmad Bin Abubekr Wahshih, had been a Chaldean, Nabathean, or Syrian by birth and had translated his work from its original tongue into Arabic. Hammer’s volume contains both the Arabic and Hammer’s English translation. The bulk of the work is concerned with what the original author asserted were the most ancient and secret of all alphabets, such as the antediluvian alphabet and alphabets attributed to Plato, Socrates, Adam, Hermes, and other mythic and historical figures from antiquity. This author was clearly familiar with the traditions of Arabic scholarship that connected alphabets with alchemic, religious, and magical practices. Hammer’s presentation has the advantage of containing visual examples of the dozens of alphabets he discusses, many of which are unique to his collection. In contrast to another exhaustive compendium published a few years earlier, Edmund Fry’s *Pantographia* (1799), in which Fry attempted to catalogue all the then-known scripts, Hammer’s focus is markedly mythical, which argues for its early date and the credibility of its original authorship within an Arabic rather than European tradition.

By the nineteenth century, advances in archaeology coupled with developments in the study of ancient and oriental (as they were known at the time) languages provided the context necessary for a historically complete account of alphabet evolution. The dis-

CHALDEAN 4.

Δ 𐤀 𐤁 𐤂 𐤃 𐤄 𐤅 𐤆
 𐤇 𐤈 𐤉 𐤊 𐤋 𐤌 𐤍 𐤎
 𐤏 𐤐 𐤑 𐤒 𐤓 𐤔 𐤕 𐤖

CHALDEAN 5.

𐤗	𐤘	𐤙	𐤚	𐤛	𐤜	𐤝	𐤞
hh	z	v	h	d	g	b	a
𐤟	𐤠	𐤡	𐤢	𐤣	𐤤	𐤥	𐤦
o	s	n	m	l	k	i	th
𐤧	𐤨	𐤩	𐤪	𐤫	𐤬	𐤭	
t	sch	r	q	ts	p		

CHALDEAN 6.

𐤗	𐤘	𐤙	𐤚	𐤛	𐤜	𐤝	𐤞
hh	z	v	h	d	g	b	a
𐤟	𐤠	𐤡	𐤢	𐤣	𐤤	𐤥	𐤦
aa	s	n	m	l	k	i	th
𐤧	𐤨	𐤩	𐤪	𐤫	𐤬	𐤭	
t	sch	r	q	ts	p		

Three of the nineteen Chaldean alphabets catalogued
in Fry's *Pantographia*, 1799

covery of the Rosetta stone marked a major turning point, since it provided a link between ancient scripts and linguistic systems, thus discrediting the notion of older scripts, particularly hieroglyphics, as a visual language of secret codes and mysterious ciphers. The notion of a link between a reduced set of hieratic characters and the forms of the early alphabet began to emerge. The highly idiosyncratic (but imaginative) Charles Forster suggested such a link in his 1845 publication, *The One Primeval Language*, but the more authoritative contribution came from Emmanuel de Rougé, in a paper read before the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres in 1859. Published posthumously by his son in 1874, de Rougé's discussion was grounded in speculative, but not wholly inaccurate, comparisons of the relations between sounds and signs in both Semitic and hieratic systems. A popular version of the origin of the alphabet, which achieved its most developed form in the nineteenth century, was that of the pictorial source of the letters from graphic signs describing the basic elements of a nomadic campsite for Semitic tribes. In this system the letters are considered schematic renderings of the basic objects and tools of such an existence: the ox, tent, camel, knife, cup, and so forth.

By the time Isaac Taylor's monumental two-volume *The Alphabet* appeared in 1899, the basics of the archaeological lineage of the alphabet had been fully established. Taylor's remarkable work, thorough in its discussion of the graphic and linguistic transformations of most of the major branches of the alphabet, remains unsurpassed for its extensive breadth and scrupulous scholarship. Though it has been superseded by specialized studies in every area, it has remained unequalled as a comprehensive treatment of the subject—much in the same way that Daniel Updike's history of printing types continues to serve as a major reference in that field.

Outside of the mainstream of alphabet scholarship—that which combines the scientific methods of linguistic, epigraphic, paleographic, and archaeological studies into a synthetic discussion of

the development of letter forms and their dates of diffusion, transformation, and disappearance—there were and still are many scholars of mystical, occult, or idiosyncratic disposition whose contributions provide insight into the capacity of the letters to provoke interpretation. Nineteenth-century occultists freely borrowed from kabbalistic, Rosicrucian, gnostic, and other traditions in a synthetic symbolic mode, while such twentieth-century scholars as Alfred Kallir have combined archaeological evidence with the theories of universal myths promoted by Carl Jung, Ernst Cassirer, and Joseph Campbell. In Kallir's work *Sign and Design: The Psychogenetic Origins of the Alphabet* (1961), for example, the letters are read as an account of the genesis of the family as an erotic archetype whose procreative powers give rise to the universe of knowledge and meaning. In many ways, the most intriguing aspects of this rich and complex history are those which stand outside the mainstream, continuing the traditions of attributing spiritual or cosmological power to the letters.

New York's First Printer

JEAN W. ASHTON

A yellowed clipping tucked in the front of *Letter of Advice to a Young Gentleman Leaving the University Concerning His Behaviour and Conversation in the World* by Richard Lingard (1696), a miniature volume in the Stephen Whitney Phoenix collection, proclaims this monitory text as “the First Book printed in New York.” On the front endpaper is the inscription “Johannes Robinson Liber 1701”; on the verso is the bold signature of the man whose name appears at the bottom of the title page, the printer William Bradford. The undated clipping apparently dates from the early twentieth century, and appended to it is an advertisement for a facsimile of Lingard’s work, printed by McAuliffe & Booth in 1907.

Since that time, the appearance of a number of other New York imprints substantial enough to be clearly designated as books, rather than pamphlets or broadsides, has rendered the bookseller’s claim inaccurate. The little book and the publisher’s confident signature, however, serve as reminders that 1993 marked the three-hundredth anniversary of the date when Benjamin Fletcher, the Royal Governor of New York, following a resolution of the Provincial Council, fetched from Philadelphia a determined young printer and allocated to him a salary of forty pounds a year to run his press. William Bradford, New York’s first printer and, in fact, the only printer in the city for more than thirty years, set up his business at “The Sign of the Bible” in Hanover Square in April 1693, and within a few weeks was producing the public documents, laws, declarations, and religious tracts that formed the mainstay of a colonial printing business. Bradford’s perseverance and independent spirit eventually gave birth to those industries central to the identity of New York—newspaper journalism and modern publishing.

In this era of instant news and satellite transmissions, when the day’s events can be reported throughout the world as they occur, it may be difficult to imagine daily life in a geographically extend-

ed colony of literate citizens without a functioning press. Town criers could call out local news to those within earshot; announcements could be handwritten and posted in select locations; word of mouth and personal correspondence could be counted upon to

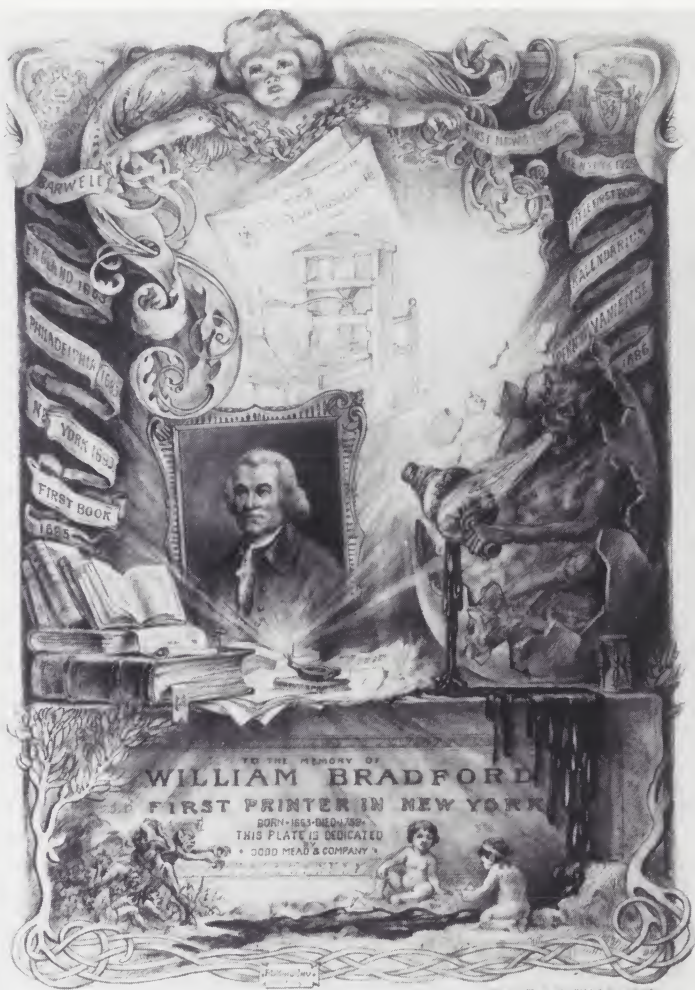


William Bradford's signature on what was once claimed to be the first book printed in New York, 1696

spread information, albeit with dubious accuracy. Laws and official documents created by city or provincial governing bodies, however, had to be sent back to Britain in manuscript form for printing before being distributed—a problem of increasing seriousness in a province that stretched from the Delaware River on the south to Canada on the north, where trade was expanding and border disputes with the Iroquois or the French settlers might have international consequences. In addition, although literary and philosophical texts were imported without difficulty, the harsh disputes between warring religious sects, which played such an important role in colonial affairs, lost immediacy when filtered by the slow process of overseas printing. Limiting the number of presses in North America, as in England, had originally served to mute the voices of rebellion or discontent, but by the last decades of the seventeenth century, the need for strong central governments within the growing colonies and the demands of an expanding commerce called for change.

The Spanish introduced printing to North America in the mid-sixteenth century, but nearly a hundred years elapsed before the first printed documents appeared in the British colonies. By 1693, only Massachusetts, Maryland, and Pennsylvania had working presses, and the latter would soon disappear. Without official appointments or government commissions, the colonial printers of the early settlement period relied for their livelihood on the prodigious output of local clerics like the Mathers, who supplied the people's voracious appetite for products of religious controversy. Profits were small and there was a constant risk of offending the ruling theocracy. Even in Pennsylvania—a more tolerant and liberal colony than its northern neighbors—the printer imported by William Penn in 1685 had constant trouble and by 1692, as we shall see, was imprisoned for sedition.

The New York press, by contrast, was intended by its sponsors to be a subsidized, entirely secular wing of the Royal government. The coexistence of prosperous Dutch and English populations discouraged a monolithic view of religion in the province; also, commercial interests played a key role in creating a cosmopolitan and relatively heterogeneous population of tradesmen and artisans who depended on civil measures to provide the stable conditions conducive to trade. The province was still reeling from the impact of an abortive rebellion led three years earlier by businessman Jacob Leisler, which had ended in his hasty execution. The uprising might have been avoided had communications between the colonists and the mother country been less confused. Realizing that the consolidation of authority would be hastened by the development of means to distribute information expeditiously, the Council in 1693 took the unprecedented step of hiring an official printer and guaranteeing him a generous salary. The scarcity of colonial printers and the urgency of New York's need is evinced in the condition included in the empowering resolution passed on March 23: "If a printer will come & settle in the City of New Yorke, [he shall be allowed in addition to his salary] the benefits of his printing besides what serves the publick."



Original pencil drawing by F. S. King for a memorial engraving to Bradford
commissioned by Dodd Mead & Company, 1903

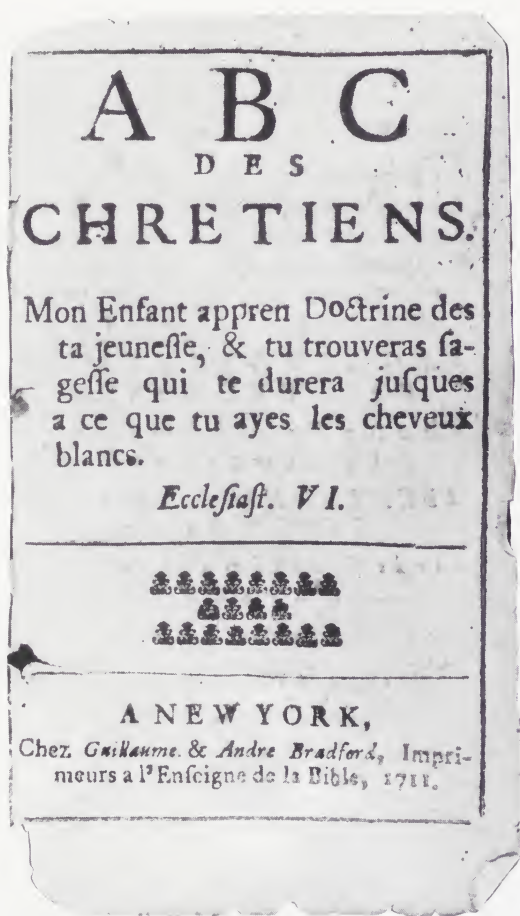
William Bradford was close by and available for the job. Born in Leicestershire, England, in 1663 and apprenticed to the Quaker printer Andrew Sowle, he married his master's daughter in 1685 and emigrated to Philadelphia under the sponsorship of William Penn. There, he printed religious tracts, attempted unsuccessfully to find the money to produce an English Bible, and, in order to secure more readily the fundamental resources of his trade, worked with others to establish the Rittenhouse paper mill. Caught up in sectarian disputes between groups of Quakers, he ran afoul of the authorities by printing without permission the local Charter. He formed strong ties to George Keith, a fiery dissident preacher. After repeated provocation of the government, both he and Keith were charged with sedition, and were convicted and imprisoned. According to the testimony of the two men, Bradford's equipment was removed from his printing office, and when New York's newly appointed Governor Fletcher visited Philadelphia in April, the Provincial commission in hand, the voice of dissent had been officially silenced.

Bradford's claim that his press was inoperative in the spring of 1693 is inconsistent with the fact that several works were printed in Philadelphia after the December 1692 trial. This makes it difficult to determine what was, in fact, the first book printed in New York. In the decades since the publication of the Lingard facsimile, other works from these early months and years have come to light, a number of them described in Wilberforce Eames's and Douglas McMurtrie's checklists of the first year of New York printing or listed in "The Bradford Imprints" by William Reese (*The New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, 63, 55–68). Since, as Reese points out, the circumstances surrounding the publication of the work once thought to claim the title—Keith's *New England's Spirit of Persecution Transmitted to Pennsylvania* (1693)—seem unclear, the honor of being New York's first book is currently thought to belong to another book by the same author, *Truth Advanced in the Correction of Many Gross & Hurtful Errors* (1694). The Lingard book, reprinted from one of several earlier London editions, was simply one among the several non-governmental

works produced by Bradford in his first decade of work that enabled him to enjoy the benefits the Council had promised. Other works for the private market published in this period include a surveying book and memorials, including at least one in French, *Le trésor des consolations divines et humaines* (1696), which was commissioned by Anthony Pintard, a local merchant.

After the turn of the century, Bradford enjoyed more than four productive decades. Although he remained official printer to the Province of New York, with only one brief interruption, until his retirement in 1743 and functioned on at least one occasion as printer to New Jersey as well (1723), the most interesting of his surviving works, outside the impressive early compilation of the Laws of New York, printed in 1710, testify to the expanding cultural and educational horizons of the colonies. An apparently unique book in the Columbia collection, *ABC des Chrétiens* (1711), which appeared under the joint imprint of Bradford and his son Andrew, later a Philadelphia printer, suggests that the demand for primers in New York transcended the boundaries of language. And the apparent absence of booksellers in the city encouraged him to act as publisher as well as printer, thereby allowing him to respond directly to local needs without endangering profits. Bradford produced the first printed drama in North America and the first printed map of the city, the Bradford-Lyne Survey of 1731. In 1727, he published Cadwallader Colden's book *The History of the Five Indian Nations*, an important attempt to explain and codify a significant aspect of the colonial experience by the conservative scientist-physician who was later to be acting governor of New York during the Stamp Act crisis. He printed conduct books, almanacs, and the first American *Book of Common Prayer*.

An even more lasting contribution was Bradford's founding in 1725 of the city's first and the country's third weekly newspaper, *The New-York Gazette*, which, following the confusing history of titles and buyouts common to eighteenth-century colonial newspapers, lasted under various guises long past the founder's death in 1752. Although Bradford was not particularly radical or provocative after his Philadelphia years, the stubbornness of his



Only known copy of a book that appeared under the joint
imprint of Bradford and his son Andrew

one-time apprentice, John Peter Zenger, might be said to follow logically from the example set by the old master in his early career. Through Zenger and another apprentice, the more highly skilled printer James Parker, the legacy of the independent printer/publisher was carried forward to the Revolutionary period, when it gave voice to the rising protests of a restive citizenry.



Hand-colored frontispiece of the 1477 German edition of
 Marco Polo's *Travels*

“Do You Imagine That Our Readers Will Expect Truth?” *or, Marco Polo and Columbia University*

CONSUELO W. DUTSCHKE

Although modern scholarship has proven Marco Polo's account of his travels to the East to be true, both in the fact of the trip and in many of the details of movement and event, the common misconception is that only recently have we credited Marco Polo with such veracity. Investigations of the truth of the *Travels* began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sinologists discovered correspondences between cities or events known from Chinese history and those mentioned by Marco Polo; scholars of ancient Persian found traces of that language in Marco Polo's terminology; evidence was brought to light by Christian missionaries of the Nestorian sects of which Marco had spoken; modern travelers set out in caravan and by motorcycle to re-trace a route that must have existed at one time. This accumulated proof came as a surprise to the Western man-on-the-street who has traditionally taken Marco Polo's recounting of his travels as a fantasy. But when did these shifts towards rejection and then towards a new acceptance occur? What evidence do we have of these shifts from Marco's truth to the world's disbelief and back again to acceptance of his veracity?

Those working from within the literary tradition, as opposed to those with formal training in history or geography, will recognize the once-accepted interpretation that Marco Polo's *Travels* were a hallucination, an exaggerated and extravagant pack of lies, a delusion shared by all participants. Such interpretations refer to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's opium-entranced “Kubla Khan” (1797): “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure dome decree . . .”; or to Eugene O'Neill's *Marco Millions* (1923) with its ironic foreword: “This play is an attempt to render poetic justice to one long famous as a traveler, unjustly world-renowned as a

liar, but sadly unrecognized by posterity in his true eminence as a man and a citizen—Marco Polo of Venice.” More recently, we read at the opening of Italo Calvino’s *Le città invisibili* (1972): “Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything that Marco Polo says . . . ” (trans. William Weaver). In a category of its own, and consciously reminiscent of the “Master of the Invisible Cities and Crossed Destinies,” is Paul Griffiths’s *Myself and Marco Polo* (1989); in this intriguing exploration of the nature of travel and authorship, issues of truth or non-truth remain constant concerns. The question of truth is first actively confronted in chapter 5: “Do you imagine . . . that our readers will expect truth?” By chapter 30, “In which we hear a dispute concerning a chapter missing from the present recension,” this issue becomes central to the meaning of the book.

In Italy Marco Polo received the honor that native prophets are supposed to receive. The title by which his book is known in Italy today, *Il Milione*, is jeeringly glossed as the “millions and millions” of spices, gold pieces, soldiers, horses, cities, provinces that Marco attributes to the Great Khan; or as the “millions and millions” of jewels and gold coins he brought back to Venice for himself. This attribution of name (to the book and to the man) and this interpretation of the name first appear in the historical writings of a Piedmontese Dominican friar, a somewhat younger contemporary of Marco Polo’s, Jacopo d’Aqui. As Jacopo begins the lengthy quotation from the *Travels* that is embedded within his own world history, he pauses to explain that the name “Millions” comes from the extreme riches that Marco had acquired. Jacopo’s statement is made with no implication that “millions” represents an exaggeration, an untruth. On the contrary, Jacopo specifies that Marco is called by this name in Venice itself, implying that his economic status is known there, and that “Millions” tells the truth about Polo’s economic status.

But that is not the way Eugene O’Neill interprets it! Later in the foreword quoted above, O’Neill observes of Marco Polo that “even in his native Venice, he was scoffingly nicknamed ‘the mil-

lionaire,' or 'Marco Millions.' They could not take seriously his impressive statistics about the 'millions' of this and the 'millions' of that in the East." Although Jacopo recorded the name "Millions" as a neutral statement of fact about Marco's wealth, O'Neill reads irony into the nickname, and thus into the book: a hallucination, an exaggerated and extravagant pack of lies.

Which is the view of the early readers of Marco Polo's *Travels*? Did they believe what Marco Polo said, marvelous as it was, or did they discount it as mere fancy? Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library is fortunate to possess two early attestations to the circulation of the *Travels*: a manuscript book and a printed book, both dating from the same time period and from the same country. These books provide an answer to the question of contemporary reaction to Marco Polo. The printed book was produced in Nuremberg in 1477; only fifteen copies are known to exist today. Columbia's copy is of particular interest in that the book's woodcut frontispiece has been hand-colored to give Marco Polo's tunic a deep, rich, orange color, and to make the grass at his feet a soft green. The frontispiece offers more, however, than the simple pleasure of its form and color, since it portrays Marco Polo as an elegantly attired gentleman standing in front of a damask cloth of honor, as if the publisher wished to assure the reader of the respectability of the author by dressing him in the equivalent of a three-piece grey flannel suit and a Gucci tie.

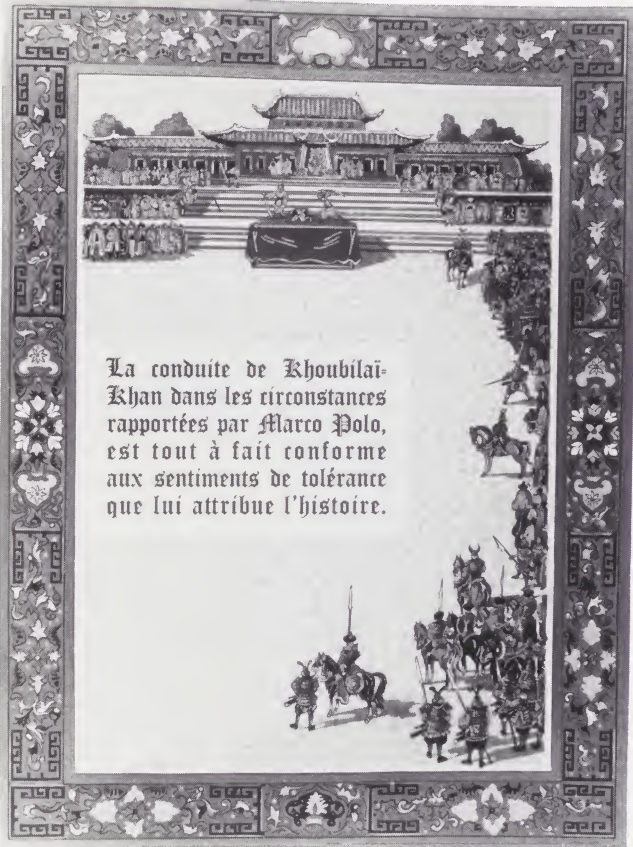
More telling are the words of the "decorative" frame: "Das ist der edel Ritter Marcho polo von Venedig der grost landtfarer der uns beschreibt die grossen wunder der welt die er selber gesehenn hat Von dem auffgang pis zu dem nydergang der sunnen, der gleychen vor nicht meer gehort seyn" ("Here is the noble knight Marco Polo of Venice the great traveler who describes for us the great wonders of the world which he himself has seen from the rising to the setting of the sun, the like of which have never before been heard"). The key words are "*which he himself has seen.*" Before doubt arises in our minds, before we begin to read of the

marvels of the East, we are assured that Marco himself, a noble knight, has seen with his own eyes these marvels. This is an attestation of truth, an imprimatur to guarantee that his book contains no errors (of fact, at any rate).

Less transparent and more perplexing is the medieval manuscript of Marco Polo's *Travels* in Columbia's Plimpton collection. The text in this case is in Latin, although, like the incunabulum discussed above, it is of German origin. On paleographic grounds, this manuscript is datable to the second half of the fifteenth century, while various textual details limit the dating to the span of time between 1471 and 1494. In appearance the manuscript is most unprepossessing: quarto-sized, on paper (with watermarks of paper produced c. 1460–1471), copied in a cursive book hand, with decoration limited to a few small, plain red initials. A manuscript of this physical type is a potential gold mine if we are seeking early readers' notes jotted in the margins, because the less expensive a book is the more likely one is to mark it up. Plimpton MS 93 lives up to its promise as a source of reader reaction. Its margins bristle with intriguing notes, all in the same slightly ungrammatical Latin, in a single rather idiosyncratic hand. This reader of the *Travels* does not disbelieve Marco Polo; in fact, he sets about interpreting Marco's information in terms of his own knowledge. "These [tribes] are the ones we call Gog and Magog" elucidates, for example, Marco's presentation of the tribes that, according to medieval legend, had been imprisoned by Alexander the Great behind the Caucasus. On occasion the reader responds to uncertainty in the text by translating the worrisome word: "Here, the trees which produce paper, I believe they are cotton." The reader is duly modest about his interpretation, but to us it is interesting that he bothers to consider the issue at all; one is normally more compelled to give precise meaning to words of fact, rather than of fiction. Our reader also demonstrates concern with accuracy in toponymy as well as botany; typical of his unpretentious comments is: "About this province which is called 'Darkness': I believe that it might be Norway and Goth-land and

person. One note, however, places the Plimpton manuscript in a category of its own. In this codex alone, of the surviving 135 medieval manuscripts of Marco Polo's *Travels*, there is evidence of Marco's veracity being questioned on the basis of personal experience. Although many readers annotated their copy, it seems that they were all armchair voyagers, and that no other traveler either read or annotated their copy of Marco Polo (with the glaring exception of Christopher Columbus, whose annotated copy—printed in Gouda c. 1483—resides in Seville). Along an outer margin of the manuscript, near where Marco Polo has been expressing enthusiasm about the tombs of the Three Kings in the city of Saba (Seuwa?) in Persia, the reader comments: "The author says that he saw their tomb, but I saw 'col——.'" This last word has been cropped by the binder, who wanted a nice even edge to the book block. The note puzzled me for a long time: [Marco Polo] says that he saw their tomb, but I saw 'columna'?—a column, instead of a tomb? Or 'collegium'?—a building, a school, a monastery in their honor? Had the reader been to Persia, to Saba where Marco Polo locates the tomb of the Three Kings? If so, it's remarkable that this is the only statement of Marco's that is queried; the reader must have seen, experienced, and agreed with the other objects and events described. Remarkable!

To my surprise, I had the fortune to discover the rest of this manuscript, when I had not originally imagined that Plimpton MS 93 might be incomplete. Its forty leaves are, in fact, excerpted from the middle of an otherwise virtually complete manuscript acquired by the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1983 in honor of Lynn and Maude White. The full manuscript, consisting of UCLA 170/584, Plimpton MS 93, and a still missing piece of several leaves, would have constituted an anthology of readings on the Near and Far East, ranging from theology to travel and parody. A note on folio 2 of the UCLA manuscript in the now-familiar handwriting suddenly solves the puzzle. The note says: "In the monastery of St. Sebastian of Ebersberg of the order of St. Benedict, I bought this book from the abbot, from whom I had



“Kublai Khan’s conduct in the circumstances related by Marco Polo conforms entirely to the feelings of tolerance that history attributes to him”;
 in *Les Merveilleux Voyages de Marco Polo*, retold by A. Aniant and
 illustrated by J. Gradassi, 1962

requested it, on the second day after the nativity of our Lord in the year 1494; this is in Bavaria, a province of higher Allemagne; I gave him the price to buy another and better book for the library of the monastery.”

The person who wrote this note, the reader whose notes we have been perusing in Plimpton MS 93, must have been a Spaniard. The Latin in his acquisition note exhibits the b/v confusion that is characteristic of the Spanish pronunciation of these letters: he spells "Sebastiani" and "Bavaria" as "Sevastiani" and "Babaria." When he translates the text's Latin word for cotton, "bambaces," he uses a Spanish word, "algodon." And the UCLA manuscript's provenance is mapped out quite clearly through a succession of inventories and library catalogues from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century: all are in Spain. We now know that our mysterious reader was a Spaniard who was traveling in Germany when, in 1494, he bought this book. I am now in the position to propose an expansion of the cropped note about the Three Kings: "Auctor dicit quod vidit sepulcrum eorum sed ego vidi *Colonie* . . . "; "The author says that he saw their tomb, but I saw in *Cologne* . . . [their relics?]" Our reader did not go to Persia, but he did travel through Germany, to Cologne where the relics of the Three Kings were the glory of the city's cathedral, and where the Kings' three crowns still grace the city's coat of arms.

If this traveled and educated Spaniard is allowed to represent reader-reaction to the *Travels* in its first two centuries of life, then we see a response that accepts the basic facts of Marco Polo's account while attempting to bring its information into line with the reader's own and attempting to correct scribal errors of place names. It may be that doubts of Marco Polo's veracity first began to surface precisely around problems of toponymy. Gianbattista Ramusio, who in 1559 was the first to prepare a critical edition of the *Travels* based on a number of sources and on a choice of quality in sources, commented in his introduction to the text, "And Marco Polo's book, because of infinite mistakes and errors, has been for many decades considered a fairy tale, and it was thought that the names of the cities and provinces were all pretendings and imaginations without any foundation, and, to say it better, it was thought they were all dreams."

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* * *

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